

AFFECTIVE MOBILIZATION AND THE CULTURE OF FEAR IN BATTLESTAR GALACTICA REIMAGINED

Enrica Picarelli

Università degli Studi di Napoli, "L'Orientale"

Imagine a large room full of computers and beeping devices. A crowd of people in uniforms is staring at a radar screen and a clock set on countdown, in the middle of the room there is a counter stacked with maps and models of air vessels. Imagine the clock striking 33 minutes and a devastating explosion hitting the room. Objects fly across the room following what presumably is an earthquake. Out of the window, a building crashes to the ground. Nervous looks and anxious expressions deliver the uncanny feeling of an expected tragedy. The shaking only lasts a few seconds, leaving traces of fear sculpted on the faces of those who rise from the floor of the control room. The air is thick with terror. For a moment the lights go out; from the darkness people hopelessly wonder what else is next. An officer hits a button, blinding lights flood the room, then nothing more. Order has been restored. Only the clock is ticking again. Another 32 minutes to go. Then what?

This scene might be considered a testimony of the many battlegrounds disseminated on the planet. The feeling of helplessness and terror it evokes is sadly familiar to readers for whom ruins are as much a source of mourning as a beacon of globalization. Seeded in the fertile ground of affective solicitation, the legacy of 9/11 renews old fears of apocalyptic disaster, marking a signifying rupture in contemporary global culture. Of this discontinuity American popular culture gives a number of complex representations which articulate in-depth analysis of post 9/11 anxieties. The fictional re-imagination of *Battlestar Galactica* occupies a central position among them.

Variouslly labelled as «a ripping sci-fi allegory of the war on terror» (Poniewozik, 2005), «a stinging allegorical critique of America's three years occupation of Iraq» (Reed, 2006) and "TV's most vivid depiction of the post 9/11 world» (Erickson, 2007), *Battlestar Galactica*'s science fiction reconfigures

current debates through mechanisms of affective appeal and the re-enactment of collective feelings of fear.

Battlestar Galactica Reimagined is an intentional and direct response to the cultural disorientation that followed the attacks on America, consciously configuring itself, in the intentions of its producers, as an «allegory for [American] society» (Moore, 2003) with a major ethical take. Dealing with issues of torture and mass murder, inspired by controversial events such as the fall of the Twin Towers, the Abu Grahb and Guantanamo abuses and the military occupation of the Middle East, the show inscribes a cultural commentary on Western politics within the platform of science fiction television. As stated by Ronald D. Moore, producer and screenwriter along with David Eick, the show creates a «parallel society to [American] society» (Moore, 2003) in order to investigate the complexities of the present from a fictional point of view¹. This metonymic position informs the series, accounting for its historical specificity and for a visual style very close to that of a documentary piece: what Moore calls «filmic truth» (Moore, 2003). Unpolished renditions of life aboard the space carrier are enhanced by the use of hard lights and manual shooting techniques employing a style that aims to deliver «the gritty reality of a story for survival» (Moore, 2003). These features as well as an editorial model based on long masters and extended takes are intended to «pull the audience into the reality of the action rather than distract it through the use of ostentatious cutting patterns» (Moore, 2003). The flow of realistic images asks people to think about themselves and the world. By way of a naturalistic depiction of life aboard a space ship, *Battlestar Galactica* does away with common space opera features like alien races and futuristic technology in order to enhance its dramatic aspects. On this point, Moore states that «[the] show is first and foremost a drama [...] about people» dealing with feelings that «the audience can identify with and become engaged in» (Moore, 2003). This essay aims to employ the series' concern with human emotions to highlight how *Battlestar Galactica* re-inflects and re-enacts the affective appeal of post 9/11 society in a way that embeds popular culture in a flow of *incorporeal* transformations.

¹ Moore, *Ibidem*. Ronald D. Moore holds a PhD in political science.

As suggested by the title, *Battlestar Galactica Reimagined* (2003-) is a science fiction show that re-adapts an eponymous telefilm which was screened for a single season in 1978. The plot of the new *Battlestar Galactica* reworks the themes of annihilation and survival explored in the original series by representing the story of a ragtag fleet of humans as they escape the nuclear destruction of the 12 colonies of Kobol enacted by the anthropomorphic race of Cylons. As the opening credits read, «the Cylons were created by man» in the form of machines or «toasters» to make life easier on the Colonies. Eventually they «rebelled» and then «evolved» until, after an absence of forty years, they unexpectedly return in humanoid form to wipe out the humankind. While the fight against total genocide continues and Humans and Cylons alike look for the mythic planet Earth, where both plan to re-build their civilizations, the series follows the development of the ambiguous relationship between former masters former slaves. The relationship in many ways mimicks the forced co-existence of occupying and occupied forces in Middle Eastern countries of which it picks out the most controversial aspects as the suppression of individual liberties, sovereign power, the relentless activity of freedom fighters as well as the atrocities of torture, religious fundamentalism and civil dissent. It also explores the themes of post-human life and hibridity creating a number of critical connections with other televisual and cinematic products such as *Bladerunner* (1982) and *Alien* (1979). The show truly revels in metatextual references making it a very porous text to engage.

Inspired by Moore's «naturalistic» agenda, some critics employ a «narrativist» approach to argue that *Battlestar Galactica* produces a «space for critical self-reflection» (Ott in Potter and Marshall, 2008:13) through an investigation of society's «internal conflicts», the «ambivalence» of

² *Battlestar Galactica*, or *Battlestar Galactica The Original Series* was produced by Glen A. Larson in the aftermath of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Following their lead it endorsed the space opera genre featuring alien races and futuristic technology and combining them with religious elements inspired by the cult of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-days Saints. Meeting a poor success it was discarded after its first season. Two years later it was revived as *Galactica: 1980* which ran only for ten episodes, and a continuation of the original was developed by actor Richard Hatch in 1999 by the title *Battlestar Galactica: The Second Coming*. In this essay I will refer to the 2003 version of the show as simply *Battlestar Galactica*.

differentiation and the dangers of technophilia³. As a space of semiotic exploration the series produces signs and meanings out of a global background of fear and terror. Re-programming and re-fashioning the textual tensions inherent in science fiction narrative and the contextual ones emerged with 9/11, the series offers a cultural commentary on the American present by a way complexification of the terms at stake. In a postmodern autoreferential and intertextual fashion, the show urges its public to engage critically with the present through a problematization of its own genre affiliation declaring itself a «whole new kind of tv»⁴. This symbolic reading of the show and of science fiction is pursued by a number of scholars, who stress the way in which *Battlestar Galactica* reflects about its process «often explicitly highlighting the crucial relationship between language and violence» (Ott in Potter and Marshall, 2008: 15, 17). This stress on the discursive dimension is valuable. However, it also seems to give what Darko Suvin has called a «mystified» or escapist reading of science fiction, posing the fictional text in a hierarchical relationship to its empirical context and valuing reproduction over creative exploration (Suvin, 1979). In stopping at the allegorical aspect of *Battlestar Galactica*, text-based readings risk to regard it as a cultural product based on pre-established assumptions and identifications that legitimize the neoconservative turn of American policy. This analogic mode of narration entails a specularization between fiction and context which uncategorically separates fiction from fact. Drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti (2002) and other scholars I would rather suggest a methodology of enquiry that obfuscates neat categorizations and proliferates in the grey zones of cultural discourses on the authority of historical grand narratives (Edward and Mendleson, 2003). As a dystopic experiment, *Battlestar Galactica* opens up this authoritative space to an investigation that shows their polymorphous and situated nature. A textual body made of discursive layers that intersect endlessly, history's porous surfaces hide the potential for metamorphic and monstrous proliferations that

³ For further reading on this see, among the others, *the Battlestar Galactica's* special issue on “Flow” on <<http://flowtv.org/?cat=127>> [consulted: June 6th, 2008] and the aforementioned volume “Cylons in America”.

⁴ See multiple interviews on www.scifi.com.

fold the present in an infinite play of flections and inflections animating a quantistic universe of «n-worlds»⁵.

Symbolic readings sacrifice this dynamic quality of science fiction in relation to *Battlestar Galactica* as if it were already coded and structured in a specific way—one that focuses on the themes of prosecution, prolonged alert, violence and the necessity of retaliation. As part of a signifying process that pairs visual signifiers with sociopolitical signifieds these readings seem to be oblivious to the *crisis of representation* that befell America in the wake of the attacks. Cultural criticism has pointed out that 9/11 has constituted a watershed not only for international politics but also for the relationship between media communications and representation⁶. The excessive quality of the event defied signification to the point of provoking «the end of ordinary narrative» and the opening up of a signifying void that popular culture and media have engaged at the iconographic level (Bayles, Brown and Chermak, 2003).

An analysis of *Battlestar Galactica* needs to take into account these issues, as well as the emergence of a widespread condition of fear that permeates our lives and visual apprehension of the world. Paying attention to the affective dimension of visual culture will unearth one of the many hidden layers that make up science fiction visual narratives indicating the critical and potentially disruptive use that *Battlestar Galactica Reimagined* makes of media representation.

Hence, if science fiction is a space of dis-orientation and a means of investigation, it may be useful to pay attention to the specific sociocultural context that gave rise to *Battlestar Galactica* as a visual variation on post 9-11 debates. Writing in the aftermath of the attacks, Baudrillard wrote about the «unforgettable fulguration of images» enacted by the «absolute event» of the attacks (Baudrillard, 2001: 403). Showing the fall of the Towers in real time, television had no grid of intelligibility to frame it. It was actually staging the unrepresentability of a defeat for which it was not prepared. Confronted with

⁵ I am here borrowing from: Braidotti, 2002, and Frasca 2007.

⁶ For a very provocative reading of the impact of the attacks on newsmidia see Baudrillard, 2001.

the emotional and unexpected impact of this event, television weaved together image and context into a continuous flow of silent scenes triggering a «shock wave» of symbolic and material death (Baudrillard, 2001: 406). This shock wave took the form of what Baudrillard called a «viral structure» of communication that entangled reality and fiction in one big «mess» (Baudrillard, 2001: 413). He described it as follows: «The West can face up to any visible forms of antagonism. But the other with its viral structure, as if the whole system of domination secreted its own anti-apparatus, its own ferment of disappearance, against this form of almost automatic reversion of its own power, the system can do nothing. Terrorism is the shock wave of this silent phenomenon of reversion» (Baudrillard, 2001: 406). By catalyzing and broadcasting the *affective* impact of the attacks, the media then addressed the population at the «pre-subjective level ... of bodily predisposition» (Massumi, 2006). By staging the inefficacy of representation and the failure of narration to signify that event, they delivered the attacks in a way that made them «part of the event itself» (Baudrillard, 2001: 414), part of a process of incorporeal capture and differential repetition of terror that turned the populace in what philosopher Brian Massumi describes as a singular «networked jumpiness» (Massumi, 2006). Not a public anymore, television turned Americans into a single mass of excitable bodies. Unable to decodify and distance themselves from the events showed on screen, they tuned directly into the affective/uncodified flow passed off by it. From that moment on, argues Massumi, television has acquired a new responsibility: it has become the «privileged channel for collective affective modulation ... at socially critical turning points», active in a process of incorporeal modulation gathered under the umbrella of fear «revirtual» (Massumi, 2002; 2006). Within this process, television has thus reconfigured itself as a *perceptual* dispositif, operating today within and beyond discursive mediations and against a background of massive attunement to fear acquired through the serial transmission of «signals without signification» (Massumi, 2006). This new approach of visual media has spawned a number of cultural products that capitalize on non-discursive strategies of communication and address bodies at the level of a general perception of danger rather than at that

of cognition, appealing to their pre/para cognitional sensorium⁷. Within this pre-subjective dimension of circulating terror, the Bush administration deployed a new form of governmentality, inaugurating, argues Massumi, a regime of control of the uncertain that makes a reactionary use of media coordination of affects. Within this highly charged affective landscape, science fiction television has often worked as the encoder of messages of legitimization that enforce the neoconservative view on the war on terrorism through symbolic representations of good versus evil battles⁸.

As a televisual product emerged straight after 9/11, *Battlestar Galactica* takes part in this «fear-blur» through a re-enactment of the affective address of the affective image and the creation of an «aural» space pervaded with evocations of terror. At the same time, its challenging representations of alternative processes of individuation and the accent on the inevitability of hybridization offer a divergent and compelling reading of post 9/11 anxieties that engage an active rather than passive public. *Battlestar Galactica* doesn't seem to create immobilized viewers made speechless with visions of an apocalyptic future of global conflict, which demands an abdication of signification. The text seems to awaken its public to a new, albeit alarming contemporaneity through ambiguous «figurations». The term figuration is mutuited by Donna Haraway (1991) and Rosi Braidotti (2001)'s terminology to refer to open and situated modes of narration that creatively disrupt patriarchal and authoritative epistemologies. Here, it offers the occasion to investigate the augmentative quality of science fiction and the oscillating position of *Battlestar Galactica* in regard to the signifying conservative re-alignment endorsed by the Bush administration. Thus, the creative landscape offered by the show is especially evident when analyzed in the light of Massumi's theory of affective modulation⁹. The scene evoked at the beginning of this essay is a good example. It is taken from episode “33” which sets the affective tone of the first season. 33

⁷ This point is argued by Mark Hanses about contemporary visual art (2004).

⁸ This is the point made about *Alias* by Erickson in Erickson: “Counter Terror Culture”, *Ibidem*.

⁹ I am here drawing on cultural studies on television as a cultural agent embedded in a circuit of signification. A concise view on the matter is summarized by John Fiske in *Television Culture* where he states that «television broadcasts programs [...] are replete with meanings» and that «it attempts to control and focus this meaningfulness into a more singular preferred meaning that performs the work of the dominant ideology” in Fiske, 1989: 1. For further reading see Hall, 1992.

minutes is the interval between two Cylon attacks and the time limit that allows the human fleet to operate a FTL (faster-than-light) jump and shake off the enemies. Within this brief time frame, the fleet re-composes and disperses again experiencing a state of constant alert. The 33-minute attacks carry on for over two days leaving the humans exhausted by the lack of sleep and the emotive tension. The jumps are 238. The lives of the survivors depend on the quantic potential of matter to flex and sleep through time and space enacting a form of virtualization that is predicated upon a landscape charged with terror. 33 minutes is the time necessary to re-modulate the fleet's affective engagement to resist and fight back while critically replicating the repetitive nature of governmental alerts through skillful conversations among the characters about the validity of it all.

Episodes like this lay at the juncture of the narrative and affective dimensions of post 9/11 television in that they appear to stage a conjunctural reassembling of «fiction» and «history» along the affect line. The imaginary society of the 12 colonies of Kobol and their diasporic search for Earth in the midst of a war against a race of anthropomorphic —thus indistinguishable— enemies, emerges out of the background of fear that has become our condition of existence. It engages with narrative tropes not only on a diegetic level, but also on a more incorporeal and meta-textual one. The fear experienced by the characters in *Battlestar Galactica* is in a way a re-imagined and re-enacted version of the same fear that embeds contemporary American society. As in the series *4400* or *Heroes* and *Lost*, 9/11 thus constitutes the premise for successful and renewed TV production, offering a starting point to fictionalize as well as re-enact the collective appeal engendered by the attacks.

Drawing on Foucault (2004), it may be argued that fear is immanent to neoliberal societies and that only discourses of danger allow governance. Keeping that in mind, the public may look at *Battlestar Galactica* from a different angle. Rather than employing a culturalist approach and search for «meanings and messages in the form of sign-vehicles» (Hall, 1992: 128) that would interrupt the flow of signification, it may also take a leap of «cognitive estrangement» and imagine it as a *gestating chamber*. A narrative hub that

vibrates with creative proliferations that emerge out of but «go beyond» (Deleuze, 1998: 24) mimetic reproduction of contemporary reality. Not only as an alternative version of our own world, the series offers itself also as an *alternate* figuration of it that grows out of our culture of fear: an adjacent plane of becoming which adds a variation to reality being one and not separated from it. Gilles Deleuze (1988) would call this transformation a «fold»: a possible present existing side by side with the one found in history books. The fold is an antidialectic concept in a quantistic universe; a world of n dimensions coming out from a single plane that everytime flexes time and space in a conspiracy that generates innumerable and indefinite fold-shades of itself. This co-presence of possible presents produces the kaleidoscopic proliferation of a multiplicity of «enunciatory propositions» which are not mutually exclusive (Deleuze, 1988). The universe of *Battlestar Galactica* is what can be found at the crossing of these multiple folds: a possible variation on the «continuum labyrinth» of fear generated by the 9/11 events (Deleuze, 1988).

Yet, how can we account for the relationship between affect and cultural representations?

The present essay has suggested that fear is the ontogenetic content of our world. Massumi writes that it is a force that impinges on bodies and «germinates» action (Massumi, 2002). The essay has also argued that *Battlestar Galactica* was born out of this fear and that fear is instrumental to its success, inspiring criticism and securing a following. But while many dwell on the tensions between text and context looking for the extratextual cues of terror that create the effect of familiarity pursued by its creators, the search for realistic rigor and naturalistic efficacy doesn't take account of the *transformative potential* of fear and of science fiction itself and of the folding they practice upon a mass of excitable bodies.

If fear is immaterial it is also indeterminate. It preexists its actualization but has no distinct contours. Rather it is a mood, incorporeal yet ready to take form: a «virtuality» (Massumi, 2002). It exists in the form of a looming that hovers over us, creating a field of relation that is undetailed yet present. Immersed in this fearful and virtual matrix, *Battlestar Galactica* doesn't

reproduce it, it reworks it with its alternative and alternate sketching of the world. It acknowledges fear all the time and fear is diagetically central to the show in that it propels the characters' search for Earth as an escape from Cylons' prosecution. But *Battlestar Galactica* doesn't just mirror the events of 9/11, nor does it stand apart from them, coding them retrospectively: instead, it declines them in a new fashion, adding a new face to the immanency and constitutive heterogeneity of affect. Fear is the premise; it is the one surface of the world that the show re-models and actualizes through a skillful use of science fiction tropes, but it doesn't constitute a hinge to action as expected by politicians. Rather, it demands space for a dynamic viewing engagement. This is especially true for the musical aspect of the series which employs unconventional techniques and «ethnic» instruments to estrange the visual narrative from its historical stance, «irrespective of any previous encoding» (Papanikolaou in Potter and Marshall, 2008: 231). The creation of an aural rather than textual space «alters the plot being acted out in the verbal and visual domains». It disengages music from its time-specific significations and offers it as «pure sound» able to rework and bring present tensions to a new dimension (Abbate in Potter and Marshall, 2008: 234). The aural dimension of *Battlestar's* soundtrack is not simply music: it is a merging of different sounds and vocal/musical suggestions that offers itself as a new science fiction trope, a line of flight out of the immanent plane of fear and productive of another reality. It is one of the main folding strategies to be detected in the series and new science fiction tv.

What is *Battlestar Galactica* then? I conclude by suggesting that it is a figuration of the «media affect» theorized by Brian Massumi (Massumi, 1993: 24-5). We could look at it not only as a creative way to reproduce the nightmare of 9/11 in an intergalactic and macroscopic way but also as an imaginative mapping that offers «new interpretations and alternative creative strategies» to it (Braidotti, 2002: 10). A model of becoming that bypasses mimetic strategies of representation to engage directly with the source of these representations and rework them along dynamic patterns of interference, consistently with science fiction's de-territorializing quality. These modes of becoming stretch

representation beyond itself. Such figurative gestures create a structural dissimetry that accounts for multiple versions of our present history: that excess of meaning that science fiction has often engaged with. In this respect, *Battlestar Galactica* offers a good example of a cultural product engaging with an active reworking of contemporary tensions to pave the way to a new and unexplored dimension of contemporary science fiction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BAUDRILLARD, Jean (2001): “L'Esprit du Terrorisme” in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, num. 101(2), pp. 403-415.
- BRAIDOTTI, Rosi (2002): *Metamorphosis: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- BAYLES, Frankie Y., Michelle Brown and Steven Chermak (2003): *Media Representations of September 11*, Westport, CT: Praeger.
- DELEUZE, Gilles (1988): *Le Pli. Leibniz et le Baroque*, Paris: Les Éditions de le Minuit.
- EDWARD, James and Farah Mendlesohn (2003) (eds.): *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ERICKSON, Christian W. (2007): “Counter Terror Culture: Ambiguity, Subversion or Legitimization?” in *Security Dialogue*, num. 38; pp. 197-214.
- FISKE, John (1989): *Television Culture*, London: Routledge.
- FOUCAULT, Michel (2004): *La Naissance de la Biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France 1978-79*, Paris: Gallimard/Seuil.
- FRASCA, Gabriele (2007): *L'Oscuro Scrutare di Philip K. Dick*, Napoli: Meltemi.
- HALL, Stuart (1992): *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies: 1972-79*, London: Routledge.
- HANSEN, Mark (2004): *New Philosophy for New Media*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press.
- HARAWAY, Donna J. (1991): *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books.
- MASSUMI, Brian (1993) (eds.): *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- (2002): *Parables for the Virtual*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- (2006): “Fear (The Spectrum Said)”, in <<http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Fear-The-spectrum-said.html>> [consulted: June 6th, 2008].
- MOORE, Ronald D. (2003): “Battlestar Galactica: Naturalistic Science Fiction or Taking the Opera Out of Space Opera”, in

- <<http://web.archive.org/web/20070208103915/http://www.galactica2003.net/articles/concept.shtml>> [consulted: June 6th, 2008].
- PONIEWOZIK, James (2005): “Best of 2005: Television”, in
<<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1141640,00.html>> [consulted: January 3rd, 2008].
- POTTER, Tiffany and C.W. Marshall (2008) (eds.): *Cylons in America*, New York: Continuum
- REED, Brad (2006): “Battlestar Galacticons”, in
<<http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?articleId=12172> > consulted: January 3rd, 2008].
- STIVALE, C.J. (1998): *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari: Intersections and Animations*, New York: Guildford Press.
- SUVIN, Darko (1979): *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Heaven and London: Yale University Press.